

2. Richard Lavender, Continuator?

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DAZZLED AS always by Professor H. A. Kelly's erudition, on first reading of his 'Last Chroniclers of Croyland' (*The Ricardian*, December 1985), I was inclined to return a pusillanimous verdict of 'Not Proven' and enter a *Nolle Prosequi*. On a further re-reading I think that 'not proven' must be qualified with 'not at all likely'. In explaining this standpoint I shall try to deal only with Kelly's central case and ignore the numerous red-herrings which swim enticingly around it.¹

The hypothesis that Bishop John Russell was responsible for the political history incorporated in the Second Continuation is a particularly alluring one. Russell's authorship would lend unusual authority to the account.² It would also mean that in the Second Continuation we have an almost unique insight into the reactions of one leading political figure to the events of his time. It would be hard to exaggerate the rarity, and the value, of such a personal account from the fifteenth century. Of course this very attractiveness carries its dangers, and we must never let ourselves forget that, on present evidence, neither Russell nor anyone else can be conclusively proved to have written the account.

Kelly's objections to Russell rest, however, on subjective criteria. (i.) The writer of the continuation does not tell us things that Russell was in a position to know, e.g. the names of the custodians of the princes in the Tower — but why should the author have considered this relevant to his account? (ii.) The acerbic tone and hostility to Richard are not appropriate to a man like Russell who served as Richard's Chancellor. One answer to this is that the writer takes a cynical view of most of the powerful people of his time, including Edward IV, so his bias against Richard, while extreme, is not inconsistent with his general style. But a further consideration turns objections like Kelly's into something of a circular argument. If Russell wrote the Second Continuation it follows that a man like Russell did hold these attitudes and was willing to put them on record, whether or not his actions seem appropriate to us.³ On the other hand, if Russell did not write the Second Continuation we have no means of knowing just what Russell's personal attitude to Richard and others was or was not, and our views on the subject must be pure supposition.⁴

The best evidence for identifying Russell with the writer is that he qualifies as the Doctor of Canon Law and Councillor of Edward IV who was dispatched on a mission to the Duke of Burgundy in 1471. He was also indisputably a member of the embassy to the Hanse towns which met 'in three separate diets' at Utrecht in 1473-4, and he played a part in the negotiations with the Scots in 1484 which the chronicler mentions in some detail. Kelly, putting forward

Richard Lavender as his preferred candidate for authorship, is reduced to 'presuming' (his own term) that Lavender was on the 1471 mission. He does not propose that Lavender was ever subsequently employed on diplomatic business, whether at Utrecht (which he does not mention) or in the Scottish negotiations. Russell wins here by default.

Careful reading of the article also reveals that Kelly has found no evidence that Lavender ever visited Crowland Abbey in person. My own reconstruction of the textual history of the continuations makes it quite unnecessary for the author of the 'political' history to have had any direct connection with the abbey at all. I argued in 1975 that an account of events was brought to the abbey from outside and then edited into a form appropriate to a monastic chronicle. Kelly, however, rejects this straightforward solution, and insists that such an account must have been written — by an 'outsider' indeed, but within the abbey and in close collaboration with the monks. Since the abbey's visitors were presumably not confined to people from the diocese of Lincoln, it is not clear why Kelly then restricts his field of candidates to those Doctors of Canon Law known to be closely associated with Lincoln. But having painted himself into this corner, he selects Richard Lavender as his best choice, and is then forced to suppose (again his own term) that Lavender must have made unrecorded stays at the abbey on not just one, but two separate occasions.⁵

Lavender had to be at the abbey at these times, because Kelly still has to account for the presence of the long passages of local material which are interpolated into the narrative of national events, without admitting my theory of later addition. Quite rightly, Kelly sees this material as emanating from the abbey monks. Rightly, because what Kelly elsewhere describes as 'clearly integral to the history' is so very narrowly centred on abbey concerns, and is overtly partisan in a way quite inappropriate to a man like Lavender whose office involved him in adjudicating between Crowland and its rival at Peterborough. But, having rejected the idea that these passages were incorporated later and independently of the original writer, Kelly is obliged to postulate that one of the abbey staff produced them for Lavender's benefit. As one argument in favour of this theory of semi-unitary composition, Kelly says that the chronicler 'uses the rare word *tragedia* to designate one portion of his history which encompasses both secular and monastic events' between the death of Edward IV and that of Abbot Richard Crowland on 10 November 1483. There is, however, no reason to suppose that *tragedia* refers to any part of the secular history. The writer has been describing the wicked actions of tenants of the abbey which 'disturbed the quiet of this good father' Abbot Richard. He then went on to the still worse troubles caused by the encroachments of the Abbot of Peterborough (our near — how I wish I could say our *good* — neighbour!), and the award unfairly imposed by Archbishop Rotherham, — it was all too clear whose side *he* was on! The writer then says he will bring this 'tragedy' to an end with the end in death of the abbot whom these events so afflicted. 10 November 1483 has not been represented as any particular end-point in national affairs, let alone as a tragic culmination. The writer had been in the middle of describing the aftermath of Buckingham's capture and execution, and when he switched to affairs at Crowland he simply abandoned Richard at Exeter, 'fully occupied in the West with this confusion of fleeing

enemies and rebels'. 'Almost certainly his *tragedia* applied to the sad history of Crowland's discomfiture in face of its various enemies, and was used in the, rare perhaps but not unexemplified, sense of 'sorry story', 'fiasco'.

There is more to come, but here I should like to indulge in one brief digression, about the poem ascribed to 'quidam metrista'. For me, these lines by someone named Richard, who is labelled 'a certain versifier', are a prime example of the way in which a Crowland editor has incorporated avowedly extraneous material. For Kelly, they must pose grave difficulties. Admittedly, he could have made more of the ascription to a man called Richard if he hadn't thought at the time that this was my own aberration.⁶ But here we have Lavender, otherwise carefully anonymous, providing a rash clue to his name, then coyly referring to himself as 'a certain versifier', and introducing the verses with an unsupported comparison between Richard and King Harold.⁷ How much simpler to postulate that the reference to Harold was due to a monkish editor who wanted to show off his knowledge of English history, and to add a small improvement to someone else's poem.

But now we are on to the concluding part of the Second Continuation and the start of the Third, and Kelly's plot becomes really convoluted. Because who should enter the picture at this stage but the rejected Bishop Russell! In early May 1486 he reads Lavender's work (minus the tell-tale note about the 1471 embassy), and brings the story up to date. While Russell, we have been assured, was not the sort of man who would have criticised the dead Richard III, it is apparently quite appropriate for him now to voice stringent criticism of Henry VII's attendants. Finally, for reasons that are not at all convincingly stated, the monks connive to conceal the fact that one of Russell's own officials had finished his part of the history a week or so earlier, possibly when at Crowland in Russell's company.

No, I think 'not proven' is too vague a decision. After reviewing the evidence presented by his counsel, I must reluctantly press for a verdict against Richard Lavender: there is not a shred of solid evidence in his favour.

Addendum

The above rejoinder was written (in late 1986) before I had seen Pronay and Cox's *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations*. I now find that Nicholas Pronay has made many of the same points about Kelly's thesis, and has put forward a case for Henry Sharp's authorship that is much better than Kelly's case for Richard Lavender, though I do not feel that he has convincingly disposed of Russell as a candidate. But like Kelly, Pronay comes unstuck when he insists that a single author, 'too clever by half' (p.74), wrote at Crowland, at a specified time, a chronicle that combines sophisticated political sections with monastic material so 'simple-minded' that it verges on caricature.

The contrast I drew⁸ between the secular history, where the writer shows a certain predilection for the first person singular, and the monastic or bridging sections, which favour the more formal first person plural or elaborately impersonal constructions, has caused a lot of bother. Kelly went to a great deal of trouble to collect examples to disprove my observation (p.154 and notes), and came up with several that serve to support them. In n.95 he is quoting from what I took to be a passage written by the 'secular historian'. Notes 97 and 98

prove nothing about unity because they refer to sections that I considered to be due to the 'redactor' — in fact I myself cited one of these examples as distinctive of his style. 'Libet' (n.99) is not an 'elaborately impersonal construction': how else could one put it? And 'ne dicam' and 'vidisses' are just commonplace.

Pronay, unfortunately, states the argument unintelligibly, quoting from a phantom female whom he studiously calls 'Mrs. Hanham' (to distinguish her from me?). Apparently somewhat illiterate — according to Pronay she used the word 'hypothetising' — she made what Pronay (p.29) rightly calls 'the amazing assertion' that the author of the secular history normally writes in the first person singular. This Mrs. Hanham also (Pronay, p.39) thought that when Fulman found leaves missing from the end of the manuscript he used Sir John Marsham's copy of the Crowland Chronicles. The wretched woman cannot have read my own book, which states (p.98) that the Marsham manuscript did not contain the continuations.

Since Pronay writes freely of other people's 'wild' and 'bizarre' speculations it is only fair to point out that his 'sensational coup [sic] in York Minster' on 23 April 1486 (p.59) apparently derives from no more than the continuator's statement that while Henry VII was in York and occupied with the ceremonies for St. George's Day he was 'nearly trapped by the cunning of the enemy'. If there was really a plot to kill Henry while he was at prayer, it is strange that no-one ever told Polydore Vergil the dramatic story. In fact, all that the chronicler probably had in mind was the plan that Vergil reports, for Lovel's troops to attack the city of York while Henry was there.⁹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. On some of these I have already corresponded with Prof. Kelly, who most generously sent me copies of his article and of some related material.
2. Whoever he was, the writer clearly got the right date for Lord Hastings' execution, and I was wrong in my earlier attempt to correct him.
3. The practice whereby civil servants sometimes 'leak' information detrimental to their government, or write revealing memoirs after retirement, may suggest that modern ideals are not always so very different.
4. There is, in fact, independent testimony from John Rous and Simon Stallworth that Russell undertook his office under Richard with great reluctance (Hanham, *Richard III and his Early Historians*, Oxford 1975, pp.42, 119).
5. The nearest he gets to Lavender is actually Stamford, 'which was only fifteen miles or so from Croyland'. The two places were not such near neighbours as this may imply. St. Guthlac had deliberately sited his monastery in the middle of fens, and to get there from Stamford one would have had to go to Market Deeping and thence by a lonely, rather crooked and probably marshy minor road to Crowland, whose direct routes were rather to Peterborough and Spalding.
6. He now agrees that the poem's Latin title translates as 'The poem of Richard on the three kings of that name'.
7. Kelly himself (n.118) points to something odd at this point, commenting that this 'should make us expect that this matter would be treated in the verses'.
8. Hanham, *Richard III and his Early Historians*, p.79.
9. Polydore Vergil, *Anglica Historia*, ed. Denys Hay, Camden Society 1950, p.10.